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Iowa Child and Adult Care Food Program Best Practice Tips for Mealtime

Types of Meal Service

There are three basic types of meal service: pre-dished, family style meal service, and a combination of pre-dished and family style meal service.

a. Pre-dished Meal Service

When all foods are pre-dished by supervising staff, the minimum amount of each required component must be served on plates, in bowls and cups to each participant at the beginning of the meal in order to claim reimbursement for the meal.

b. Family Style Meal Service

A meal is defined to be "family style" if:

- The full amount of each food component, for each participant (according to age for children) and supervising adult is on the table at the beginning of the meal;
- Food is on/in common platter, plates, bowls, or pitchers;
- Food is passed around the table to all participants (passing at least twice is recommended);
- Participants serve themselves.

c. Transitioning from pre-dished to family style meal service

As a center transitions to family style meals service, steps may be taken to help teach participants about family style meal service. But also in the transition, the minimum amount must be on the table or on the participant's plate/bowl/cup at the beginning of the meal service depending on which food is selected to be pre-dished versus family style meal service.

Step-by-Step Tips for Successful Mealtime

This is a list of mealtime ideas from child care centers and homes in Iowa. Many thanks to those who contributed their suggestions.

1. Wash hands just before mealtime. Washing hands in small groups under adult supervision is recommended. (Sitting on the floor for a story after washing hands may recontaminate hands.) Soap, running water, suds, individual paper towels and adult supervision are necessary for clean hands. Hand washing for each child should last 20 seconds. Play or sing a song (e.g., "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" as a time frame for hand washing.)
2. Participants may help with table setting. Hands should be washed first. Instruction, observation and adult supervision are necessary to follow good sanitation procedures.
3. Have all foods and utensils on the table before anyone sits down at the table. A few extra clean utensils on the table in a small basket or on a serving cart near the supervising adult, will make it possible to replace dropped items without leaving children or adult participants unsupervised during meals.
4. Participants may choose places or have assigned tables/seats using name cards, colors or shapes. Do not overcrowd tables because this encourages spills. Participants who need more mealtime assistance or more supervision may be seated near an adult supervisor. Nor more than 7-8 participants (or fewer if young children such as toddlers) and at least one supervising adult at each table is best. (DHS license capacity rules must be followed).
5. After washing hands, children should go directly to the table and wait until the teacher says they may begin passing food. This avoids lots of problems, spilled food, dropped utensils, etc.
6. To observe possible choking and to encourage appropriate sanitation, the teacher should be seated at the table during the entire meal service (beginning to end). If there is one supervision adult, she/he should sit at the side center, not at the end of the table to provide better supervision and to assist with passing foods. Two supervising adults at the table may sit at opposite ends or on opposite sides near the ends. To avoid choking, children should not be excused from the table if they still have food in their mouths.

7. Use small sized serving containers (pitchers, bowls) and utensils for family style service so participants can easily pass foods. Use two bowls (example: chili) per table because one bowl maybe too heavy, too full or too hot for easy passing. All foods should be passed before anyone begins to eat. The "table helper" or the host may then say when "it's time for everyone to eat".
8. Children should be appropriately encouraged to serve themselves, and to taste/eat the foods provided. Children should never be pressured or forced to take or taste foods, and foods must not be used to discipline or reward children. Eating or finishing a food should not be required before another food is offered. However, if participants do not take foods the first time they are passed, the supervising adult should encourage that food be passed (if there is food left in the serving containers) several times before anyone is excused from the table. (According to the "offer vs. serve" instructions in the adult meal pattern, adult participants may decline to take foods at breakfast, lunch or supper.)
9. Use "indoor voices" at mealtime. Speak with each child or adult participant at your table. Be relaxed, personal and speak with each participant by name. Talk about the foods you are eating, where they come from, why they are good for us, colors, shapes, flavors. Mealtime is not a break time for teachers (supervising adults), but is a continuation of the learning environment and provides an optimal opportunity to develop reading and math readiness skills through sense based learning as well as food appreciation.
10. Mealtime manners or expectations should be simple and appropriate for the age of the participant. The rules should help to make mealtime relaxed, pleasant and positive for all.
11. Supervising adults should eat the same foods as children at mealtimes. Adults who positively model food acceptance and tasting new foods are the strongest influenced on children's food preferences. This important part of a quality child care environment should be written into staff job descriptions and part of center policies/procedures. If supervising adults need special foods due to health conditions or disabilities, this should be openly explained to children.
12. Having access to paper towels or sudsy cloths makes it possible for participants to clean up after their spills. This fosters feelings of competence. Participants should not be made to feel bad about spilling, but will learn that spills just happen and the important thing is to make things right again.
13. Children can easily clear their own places. Children should ask to be excused from the table. At that time the supervising adults may encourage time for passing foods, positive encouragement and conversation. If the child is no longer hungry, he/she should be excused. By excusing a few children at a time, the clean up area is less congested and there are fewer spills. Clean up can be at the dining table or at a clean up area that may include a table to rest the plate on, a garbage can for paper waste and food scraps, a pan to collect dishes, a sudsy pan to pre-soak utensils and sponges or paper towels to wipe their place at the table. Doing a book or puzzle area after clean up gives children who finish mealtime early a quiet activity near the eating area until others finish their meals. One supervising adult should go to the activity area with the children, but at least one supervising adult should remain with children who are eating to provide adequate supervision until children are finished eating.
14. Participants need plenty of time to eat (possible 15-50 minutes depending on the meal type and the number of foods served), and should not be required to finish the meal. Even if participants choose not to take foods or to eat, they will benefit from socializing with the group at the table to talk, listen and relax.
15. A supervising adult must be seated at each table. This may include the teacher, teacher assistant, administration, volunteer, or cook. All supervising adults/mealtime volunteers must be trained in mealtime policies and expectations so interaction with participants will be consistent.
16. Supervising adults need a break time during the day to attend to their personal needs and to decrease job related stress. These breaks are an essential part of maintaining a quality Care Program. During these breaks, supervising adult may eat other foods of their choosing such as coffee, pop, etc., which should not be eaten during the participant's mealtime.
17. A written Center Mealtime Policy should be developed which will describe mealtime policies and procedures, and staff mealtime responsibilities. This should be included in the Parent Handbook. It should be part of new staff training and should be posted in the meal serving area as a reminder to staff and volunteers. Children or adult participants should also have mealtime procedures and policies explained to them when they first participate.
18. The director must take responsibility for developing and implementing mealtime policies and procedures. The director or authorized representative must adequately train and supervise staff so CACFP requirements are met. Staff members are responsible for knowing CACFP menu patterns, serving sizes and mealtime procedures.